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Early Career Researcher

Title (read-only)

'Let them speak for themselves' - the methodological journey of a teacher-researcher shifting from 'silver bullet' intervention to classic, actor-led grounded theory

Abstract (read-only)

As a teacher, the importance of student engagement is undeniable. Pivotal for learning outcomes, the nature of motivation is the individual's energy to work effectively (Martin, 2008). However, reflecting on eight years of teaching, it is evident that there has been a shift in the relationship between students and their engagement with education; their 'drive to learn' (Martin, 2008) appears more elusive than before. Naturally teachers seek a solution to this – the silver bullet that might help students to be more engaged, more focused, and more motivated. With so many different frameworks and constructs of motivation – self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 1981), self-schema and self-efficacy

(Piaget, 1952), expectancy value theory (Eccles et al, 1983) - it is not unsurprising that teachers turn to academic research to find an approach to help their students realise their potential.

A systematic review considering academic motivation interventions published between January 2008 and March 2021 narrowed down a broad range of 493 studies to 31 using selective criteria, and found that there was limited consensus with regards to which interventions had any long-lasting, positive and significant impacts on student motivation (Salter, 2021). Nevertheless, students are persistently 'done to', with educational bodies recommending approaches to school leadership teams to implement among their teaching staff. Very rarely do students themselves have any input – not a single study in the systematic review included students designing or shaping the intervention – despite studies suggesting that optimal student learning will usually be student led (Nalonga, 2024).

Fast-forwarding, between 2021 and 2025 over 6000 studies were published, globally, with 'student motivation' as a keyword. Of these, a mere 14 featured 'student voice' in the abstract, and only 7 the phrase 'student-led'. Furthermore, many of these studies were concerned with more interventions, designed by adults and professionals distanced from the natural setting. Yet student engagement is a fundamentally internal psychological process (Winne, 2019) and the experiences and thoughts of students are absent from the research.

This is where this doctoral research seeks to intervene; to set out an innovative approach to student motivation – an actor led classic grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

As part of the wider study, this paper considers the methodological shift of a teacher-researcher from intervention design to classic grounded theory, while also reflecting on the debate between the positivist position and the more prevalent constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2014). This paper maintains that a degree of detachment is necessary when considering student voices and childhood – to let the data speak for themselves (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and to reduce the unwarranted intrusion of the researcher's experiences, which are not those of the students. This paper aims to contribute to the wider discussion around researcher positions, particularly those of the teacher-researcher.

Additionally, this paper encourages other teacher-researchers to embrace the potential chaos of actor led methods, and discusses the different activities that allow the voices and emotions of students to be captured using their own vocabulary. Rather than students being observed through adult proxies and accounts (Driessnack, 2006), student journals, workshops, focus groups and lesson observations allow for rich contextual data to be constantly compared until

the underlying social phenomenon is conceptualised. It also evaluates the influence of the natural setting, particularly upon power balances and students' responses to the context (which can potentially be coercive, see Messiou et al, 2025). This paper also discusses the ethical considerations of working so closely with students, and allowing them to lead research in the form of a working party particularly in terms of theoretical sampling.

The paper presented here considers the following research questions, in an English secondary school. In the existing and established student motivation research, how empowered are students in reality? Is the student experience truly central to the research process and to the implementation of research outcomes? If not, how can research on student motivation be conducted through truly student-led processes?

One of the most enduring frameworks of motivation, self-determination theory - demands that autonomy be considered, to increase and enable engagement (Ryan and Deci, 1981). A question needs asking; in all that has come before, where is the student autonomy, and does a classic grounded theory approach therefore offer a far more ethical and equitable process when exploring that very same topic? This paper offers one teacher-researcher's answer as a reflective commentary and a call to action from others to change for the better with regard to student voice, student participation, and student led research.

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Keywords (read-only)

methodologies, student voice, actor led, grounded theory

Themes (read-only)

Theory, methodologies and ethics in Education

Second Theme (read-only)

Practitioner Research

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